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The Story of Christmas



Sun, Saviour and Santa Claus

by
Thornwell Jacobs

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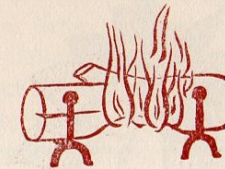
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Published November, 1941

Dedicated to
T C. L.
The embodiment
of the
Spirit of Christmas

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Oglethorpe University Press

A kiss—and after winter's wait,
A lover hastens home;
A star hangs on the garden gate;
A planet whispers, "Come!"

And though her faith in snow be bound,
Her feet with frost be shod,
The crocus rises from the ground
And leaves the rest to God.



The Story of Christmas

Sun, Saviour and Santa Claus

I.

Christmas Eve has come again! The President of the United States has just touched the switch and illuminated the community tree in the national capital. From Virginia, north, our country is covered with a soft, white blanket of new-fallen snow. The heavens declare the glory of the hour. Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn hang like brilliant lanterns along the zodiac, in almost the same position as at the birth of Jesus Christ, eclipsing even the jeweled splendor of Orion and adding their charms to the sweet influences of the Pleiades. The full moon is rising in the east, giving a "lustre of mid-day to objects below." Swift-sandaled Mercury has just disappeared below the western horizon on an urgent message for his Lord, the Sun. Joyously anticipating the coming of Santa Claus, an expectant world rolls its yule-logs, mixes its egg-noggs, lights its Christmas trees and meditates upon the Nativity, for the great day-star has turned upon his heel in the south and is about to return for another spring. The whole world rejoices. The yule log crackles. Candles glow in windows everywhere. The carollers sing in Louisburg Square. Christmas music vibrates millions of radios. "Jingle Bells," "Santa is Coming," "Silent Night, Holy Night;" mistletoe, syllabub, holly boughs, plum puddings. Christmas eve has come again!



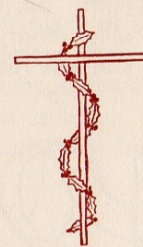
II.

Cheery, tender, inspiring Christmas cards are everywhere. There are lovely scenes in blue and green and red of ugly city streets made beautiful by softly falling snow with red-litten church windows and glowing cottage firesides; of little brooks half frozen in the ice; of snow-tracks of wild things along forest trails; of green wreaths tied with red bows hanging upon doorways, lit by arched candles; of evergreens and poinsettias and hollies and cedars and sleighs, jingling their merry bells; of old-fashioned stagecoaches in gold and red and blue, crunching their icy ruts, packed to overflowing with happy home-comers; of little boats beating their way over turbulent seas toward quiet harbors under a full December moon; of snow-bound villages with cheerful yule-logs and red candles and white-tipped steeples, of mistletoe swinging from glistening candelabra.

And there are heart-warming pictures of the happy, jolly face of Santa Claus, mounting snow-covered roofs in the glittering moonlight while little children in their nighties peep expectantly toward the hearth below or peer through frosty windows hoping that they may catch a glimpse of his reindeer; of little dogs, tied in red ribbons, sniffing bags full of presents; of landscapes covered with ice and sleet and snow and little red-breasted birds at the feet of jolly snowmen; of bulging stockings, hung beside blazing hearths and young fathers and mothers silhouetted by its cheerful light; of happy firesides and evergreen Christmas trees, glowing with jeweled fruits and laden with the gifts of love.

And there are scenes from a far-distant land where the tinkle of the camel's bell is heard as the three Wise Men trudge slowly over the sands; desert scenes with the brilliant star shin-

ing in the east and watchful shepherds guarding their trustful sheep on the hillsides or listening to angelic music floating down from the empyrean; a little babe lying in a manger while all the world adores as father and mother marvel at the halo around his head; snatches of memoried hymns and of lovely passages from old poems; worshipful congregations, pressing their way toward welcoming churches, and everywhere—bells, bells, bells!—camel's bells, chime bells, sleigh bells, church bells!



III.

As you contemplate all this happy outpouring of beautiful art, there mingles with memories of Christmas parties of Auld Lang Syne a sense of wonder that once each year this lovely snow storm of kindly, joyful good-will should crystallize like so many flakes from the dull gray sky of the winter solstice. When did all this begin and where and why? And how came there to be so intimate a comradeship between night and magi and reindeer; between nature and noels and the Nativity, between chilling snow and jolly Santa Claus and baby Saviour?



IV

It all began in the long ago when the dawning light of intelligence in some meditative human being first revealed that

the weakening winter sun was returning to strength, that his good, kind rays were brightening again, that his journey to the south had ended, that he was coming back once more and with him spring and food and warmth and flowers and bird songs and life resurrected in all its fullness. The long winter night would soon be over. Cold and ice and hunger and fear would shortly retreat before warm days and springing grass and returning migrants from the south. So joy replaced sorrow, confidence supplanted fear, as all ordinary tribal life stopped until it was very certain that the sun was really coming back to warm and feed and save them.



V

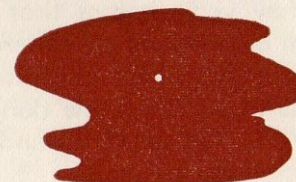
The Christmas-tide is the most interesting season of the year. More than any other it is the period of myth and legend and lovely memory, around which the happiest hours that the human race has ever spent on earth cluster, naturally. Of all the seasons dear to the hearts of men, the twelve days between December 25th and January 6th are the most famous in song and story and most endeared to poet and priest and child and king.



VI.

Archaeologists digging up old graves in Europe frequently come upon skeletons buried from 25,000 to 50,000 years ago, relics which bear testimony to the earliest days of paleolithic man. These old Neanderthalians who inhabited the continent before homo Sapiens appeared had practically none of the ac-

cessories of civilization. They had no domesticated animals, not even a dog. They had no houses, nor tents, nor cows, nor sheep, nor pottery. They were naked savages, making a living as hunters and trappers without even bows and arrows. To the astonishment of anthropologists and to the delight of all men and women who love religion, the amazing discovery was made, as these relics were dug up one by one that they were buried in an east and west direction, ceremonially, and that around them had been placed an assortment of presents, weapons and stone implements and food supplies, showing that long before civilization itself had been developed mankind counted the rising and setting of the sun as an allegory of life and hoped that, as the great star rose triumphantly from darkness so they might, likewise, live again.



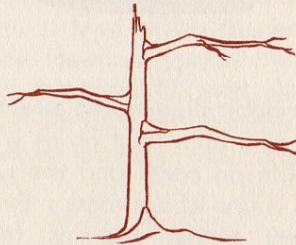
VII.

Few of us who inhabit illuminated streets and who can, by the turning of a finger, switch light on at will, realize that the normal condition of life on earth and the normal condition of the universe at large, is one of darkness. Even in our own solar system the outermost planet receives far less than one-thousandth as much light as the earth. One need only go a couple of light-years into space before our sun has dimmed its rays and is no brighter than any one of many thousands in the sky. Darkness reigns everywhere except in the immediate neighborhood of one of the stars. It happens that our little earth is close up to such a hearth of happiness and basks in the beams of the great fire which heats and lights us so benignly. Out beyond us, for interminable thousands of millions of miles, there is only darkness.



VIII.

And as it is with space, so it is with half of the day itself. The night now means little more to us than an opportunity for pleasure and revelry. Streets, many miles long, are illuminated at the pressing of a button. Instantly, sunlight saved through the millenniums in the hearts of our coal mines or harnessed in our waterfalls turns great cities into galaxies of glowing starlets. But, of old, it was not so. Only a few years ago there were no electric lights. A few years before that there were no gas lights. A millennium or so before that there were no lamps nor even candles. For countless centuries mankind had only the campfire. When the night fell, came danger and death from all of the prowling enemies of the forest and the plain.



IX.

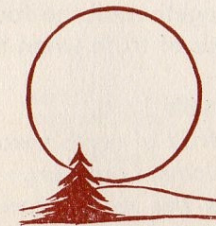
But even worse, the sun, itself threatened to go out. The keen eye of early man observed that day by day, as he rose in the east, his pathway through the heavens lay farther and farther to the south. Each day his strength weakened. Each day it became colder. Each day the food supplies diminished. Each day the fruits and the berries and the nuts became fewer. Finally, the snows came and the sleet, and all the earth was

dead. It seemed as if the sun had, indeed, forsaken them and that nothing further remained of joy and happiness on earth.



X.

Then, at the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, something happened. The anxious watchers of the solar disc noted how the great star paused in his journey southward and, within a few days, turned upon his heel and began to come back to them, bringing with him all of the joy of the spring, with its food and its warmth and its safety and its strength. With glad hearts, they celebrated that return in the triumphant belief that their great and good friend, the unconquerable sun, first and chiefest of all the gods in whatever age and by whatever people adored, would not forsake them, but would return once more to make life happy and safe and joyous. That is the origin and meaning of our Christmas trees and our Yule-logs and our mistletoe boughs and all the wild happiness which went with the celebration of the winter solstice for centuries before the coming of Christ.



XI.

And even today our scientists hasten to confirm the instinctive wisdom of our ancient ancestors who in the brilliant

effulgence of the Lord Sun recognized the face of God. For who can find words wherewith adequately to describe his divine majesty? Who can picture to himself those huge eruptions rising to a height almost equal to the radius of the sun itself, over 300,000 miles, whose scarlet passions would consume our little earth and lick up our moon in its flames in the twinkling of an eye? Who can describe the ineffable glory of those fierce tornadoes called sun spots which open up the interior of the photosphere so that one can catch a glimpse of that sublime power which resides in fury unharnessed? Or who of us can attempt to tell the full story of what that tiny two-billionth part of his light and heat which our little earth receives has meant to us; of how all life and motion, all vegetation and earthly verdure, all movement of wind and weather, all rippling of stream and river, all waves of lake and ocean, all pulsing of heart and artery, all brilliance of diamond and intellect, all muscles of steam and armature, all power of all sorts whatever—who can tell the full story of the dependence of our earth upon the sun? For, after all, the wind bloweth whither He listeth. At his word the clouds are formed around the particles that he sends forth, and pour out their floods. The mountains are the work of his fingers, chiselled by his rain-storms. The passions of the oceans are his also, and with his lightning he sends his messages to the ends of the heaven. When he wills he stores up his bright rays in peat and coal to comfort the coming generations or in diamonds to dazzle their eyes. He it is who loosens the frozen rivers and orders forth the equatorial storm upon its mission, and his is that silent power by which the chlorophyll of countless leaves gather together all the food for all living things. Truly Watson spoke words of truth when he wrote:

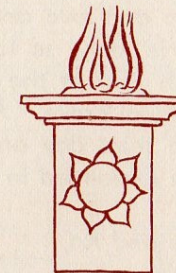
*"O bright, irresistible Lord,
We are the fruit of earth's womb, each one,
And fruit of thy loins, Lord Sun,
Whence first was the seed outpoured.
To Thee, as our father, we bow,
Forbidden thy Father to see,
Who is older and greater than thou, as thou
Art greater and older than we."*



XII.

The sun, the cemetery and the sermon are all sons of the same father and sources of the same inspiration,—religion. All over the continent from which our ancestors came there are to be found various types of burial mounds. Some are little roofed huts of stone called dolmens. Occasionally great menhirs or standing stones are set in special lines about them. Sometimes these stones are arranged in circles, as cromlechs. There is a tendency always to orient these mounds, to associate them with the movement of the sun, the life of which from the beginning of human thought has seemed to be like the life of man. As the sun rose in the morning, attained its full strength at its noon and wasted away in its old age toward the west, so did man. As the sun began going north again after the winter solstice, growing stronger and stronger until the summer solstice and then weakening unto its death as the winter once more approached, so did man:

*As after the storm shines the sun forth,
As after the darkness comes morning,
As after the winter, the spring wakes.*



XIII.

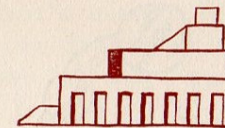
Two hundred years ago there was no United States but there was religion. Two thousand years ago there was no Great Britain nor France nor German Reich but there was religion.

good for conclusion

Twenty thousand years ago there was no school nor house nor farm nor church but there was religion. Before the first letter of the first alphabet there was religion. In the first mind of the first man there was religion. Before the first vowels and the first consonants of the first voice there was religion—the Christmas religion.

Thus the Christmas religion, which is consciousness of the good God, revealed in the blessings of his sun, began with the birth of life on earth, with the very first bit of protoplasm that, in the terms of science, could "move, assimilate, react, contract, metabolize, adapt, reproduce." It deepened, widened and intensified with every development of life. When man came, it gradually concentrated into the idea of a Personal Power, greater than all other personal powers, upon whom all things were dependent for life's blessings. Through what a long and glorious dynasty of Kings has it come down to us! Amon, Ra, Shamash, El, Allah, Elohim, Dyaush-Pitar, Zeus-Pater, Jupiter, Baal, Jehovah, Thor, Great Manitou, Brahma, Ahura-Mazda, Goudan, God! All these and a thousand more bear witness to the age-long gratitude and adoration of mankind toward the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who dwells in glory ineffable; "For Jehovah-God is a sun." He, only, was the giver of every good and perfect gift—warmth against the winter's blasts, flowers and songs of spring, berries and fruits of summer, nuts and grains of autumn. He, only, could redeem. He, only, could save. He, only, could spread a table of good things for his disciples. He, only, could cleanse from sin by baptism in the blood of his bull, slain for suffering humanity at each easter. He, only, could restore life and love and beauty and joy to a dead and frozen earth. He, only, so loved the world that he never forgot to return each year at the winter solstice as soon as he resurged from his annual grave. And he, only, could rise again from the dead each third day and ascend into heaven. No wonder his worshippers exclaimed in ecstasy:

*"I am Horus and Ra,
One with Osiris
He who hath risen from death,
Beareth me with him!"*

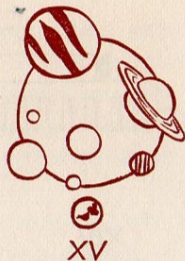


XIV.

After all, ancient men had a remarkable type of religion. It was genuinely scientific. They worshipped facts. Their ritual was based upon actual observations. Their God was someone whom they could see and feel and whose presence was intimately a daily affair with them. In short, they watched the traits of their God and they built their temples in accordance with his habits. Such were Stonehenge and Avebury in Europe and the Pyramids in Egypt and Mexico and the Ziggurats in Asia.

It should be observed that this is just what all great religious teachers have done. All men who have founded religions have gone back behind the theologies and dogmas and superstitions with which their generation was familiar and have founded their faith upon observed realities. Moses did that. Jesus did that. Mohammed did that. Buddha did that. Confucius did that. Furthermore, the most striking development in religious circles today is the reversion to the same tendency all over again. Once more men are returning to reality, to knowledge, to facts, to observations, and they are identifying them with religion. Once more we celebrate easter at sunrise. From inner psychological depths to the distant phenomena of nature as revealed in astronomy and geology, by way of physiological psychology, mankind today is looking and longing for a reinterpretation of life's experiences. In this sense it may be said that Stonehenge is one of the most modern of churches. It was built to celebrate vital and observable events, the solstices and the equinoxes, lodges along the annual pilgrimage of God. All of which shows with clearness what a deeply religious season and what an ancient religious festival Christmas really is.

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Who of us is there that has not read with delight the ancient story of the Sleeping Beauty, the lovely daughter of a beautiful mother's prayer, whose destiny it was, at the age of maturity, to enter the fateful chamber of the palace and there, pricked by the point of a spindle, to sink into her long repose, from which she could only be awakened by the kisses of Prince Charming. Her sleep is as the sleep of the Great Mother who dreams in icy peace, the snows and the sleet of the long winter upon her, whose slumbers none may interrupt until the yellow-haired sun breaks through all obstacles, and with the kiss of spring, awakens her again to the renewed joys of the life of another year. As it is with the Father Sun, so it is with Mother Earth below, each day of whose life is a counterpart of his footsteps on high. Nor did early man fail to grasp the meaning of this parallelism. It was as if they, in their earliest consciousness, understood that there is a certain spiritual quality in the world about them, a definite moral order of the universe. And, in the dimness of their groping, their hands touched at the beginning the solution of the mystery; that the universe is one; that its unity is its meaning; that as it is with one of its parts so is it with all; that the lives of men and earths and suns are in essence the same; that Father Sun could not move in the sky nor Mother Earth wait anxiously below without conveying to their children the solution of the mystery of their own struggles.

If we can forget the impersonalities of our science long enough to remember that we do not ourselves know the source of power, that we can only conceive of it in terms furnished by the constitution of the human spirit, that we have deprived nature of that richness wherewith earliest man filled it, that they had no terms with which to speak of the world around them except terms of thought and emotion and deed, in short, of life,

and that it still remains a question as to whether they or we are nearer the truth, we shall begin to understand how much this message of Father Sun may mean to us. By it we are brought sharply face to face with the fact that, from the beginning of their thinking, when men sought to answer the riddle of the universe and especially the riddle of life and death they, as we, have tried to find out what it is all about, what it is for. They answered it in terms of volition and spirit and we answer it in terms of force and law. To ancient man heaven was so near that God could easily step down in the cool of the evening to walk with man in Eden. We measure its remoteness in light years. Many of our wisest still find high wisdom in these earliest conceptions. Surely there were few greater in his generation than Herbert Spencer, who summed up his knowledge in these words: "We are ever in the presence of an infinite and eternal energy, from which all things proceed." "Of what I call God, and fools call Nature," Browning explains. Nor among those who most clearly understand the philosophy of history have there arisen many greater than Matthew Arnold who unlocked the story of men with this key: "There is a Power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness." No one has expressed it more finely than Camille Flammarion: "There is an incommensurable Power which we are obliged to recognize as limitless in space and without beginning or ending in time and this Power is that which persists through the changes in those sensible appearances under which the universe presents itself to us." This is He of whom the ancient Omar spoke:

*"Whose secret presence through creation's veins,
Running quicksilver-like eludes our pains,
Taking all shapes from Mah to Mahi and
They change and perish all, but He remains."*

Nor should we forget that seer of these latter days who grasped the newest discoveries of science in one hand and held to the oldest of faiths in the other, Tennyson, who speaks to us almost in ancient mythological phrases, when he writes:

*"The sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the
seas, the plains—
Are not these, O soul, the vision of Him who
reigns
Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and spirit with
spirit can meet,
Nearer is He than breathing and closer than
hands or feet!"*



XVI.

Came Joshua ben Joseph with his gentle wisdom and tender grace to love a whole world into brotherhood. With the pure white flint of his purpose he struck the divine spark from the steely souls of benighted humanity. For years too few and too short he spoke of the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, of *faith, faith, faith*, that magic wand of Hermes which turns evil and pain and sorrow into gold. After a life so perfect that the world called him God he was crucified by human hate and then glorified by human love. He became the light of the world, the sun of righteousness, the radiant Lord of the sky. Although the date of his birth as described in the gospel narratives was quite evidently not in the winter its celebration soon dominated the age-old festivals of the winter solstice: the Palmtree celebration of Egypt, the Hanukkah of Judea, the Saturnalia of Rome, the Yuletide festivities of the Nordics and even Natalis Solis Invicti, the birthday feast of the Invincible Sun. "After all", as St Chrysostom urged, the worshipers of Mithra "call this December 25th the birthday of the Invincible One but who was so invincible as the Lord? They call it the birthday of the Solar Disc but Christ is the son (sun) of Righteousness." And so, all over the civilized world the festivities of the winter solstice celebrating the birthday of the newborn sun became Christ-mass, the celebration of the nativity of Jesus Christ. But the boar's head and the wassail bowl and the

yule-log and the evergreen tree still abide as vestigial remains of the ancient faith associated with that happy day when the weakening Father-sun began once more to wax strong and warm.



XVII.

And the three wise men, who were they? It is said that Melchior, from the ruddy sunset land of Arabia, received spiritual wealth in return for the shrine of gold that he brought. Such a man must he have been who first of all men watched understandingly the return of the sun from his southern odyssey and prophesied confidently that so would all future winters end in the joys of spring. Among the first of scientists he dispelled fear of eternal winter and assured mankind that by the Will of God the succession of the seasons was dependable. Young Gaspar with his physician's myrrh received humble insight into truth in return for the contents of his golden-trimmed horn. His must have been the wisdom of him who first penetrated understandingly the mystery of the Eternal Trinity, father, mother and child, Osiris, Isis and Horus; who saw first that "each of us is a fragment torn from the Father-God", that The Child is the keystone of civilization. Balthasar, from the land of spices, for his censer of frankincense was given perfect faith—faith that the universe is favorable, that kindness permeates the hearts of men, even descending the chimneys of their houses when doors and windows are locked, that "every good gift and every perfect boon cometh down from the Father of Lights," that to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you is the Law and the Prophets."



XVIII.

Three hundred years passed before godly St. Nicholas added a third motif to what, ever afterward, was to be our Christmas. It seems a far cry from the three golden balls of the pawn-brokers to the mitred head and canonical robes of the Archbishop of Mira but money lenders and merchants and ship owners were once the same and St. Nicholas' prayers were potent over wind and wave. So the three large bags of gold that he secretly tossed down the chimney as dowries for three moneyless maidens became the sign of their patron saint and of their businesses. Chapels and churches in his honor rose on all seacoasts, more even than to any of the disciples of his Lord. As each new land adopted his cult he changed his habit and name and character. Passing Lapland he traded his white horse for eight reindeer. His long journey from Asia Minor to America led him to Holland where he became Santa Nikalaus. Finally, he reached New Amsterdam where his ascetic countenance became florid and chubby and he doffed his ecclesiastical robes in favor of red-and-ermine coat and cap. He discarded his bundle of switches for bad little children and burdened his sleigh with bags of presents for those who were good. Here, also, his birthdate, like that of Jesus was changed from December 6th to that of the Invincible One. Today, he reigns supreme as King of Christmas, the world over; the apotheosized embodiment of kindness, charity and good cheer.



XIX.

Such is the joyous Trinity of our happy Christmastide, the loveliest and most meaningful of all festive seasons—the nativities of Jesus, of Santa Claus, and of the Vernal Cosmos, instinctively associated by all those who love nature and Christ, and little children. How inevitable it is that each December, as the old year dies we should be reminded of the birth of the child. When the trees are bare and there is no more hope left in the heart of the hickory, when the greenness of the grass is gone and all flowers have faded, when the frost is lord of the leaf and the ice may blanket the poplar with impunity He sends his messenger to his great star and orders him to retrace his steps toward the north. At His word the re-born sun turns upon his heel, having heard that it is His will to resist the pride of the ice and melt the hoar frost into dew. So, we who know of this great thing which is being done for us gather all our joys over the deliverance from the cold, our happiness at the coming of another spring, our gratitude for safety from all night and frost, our confidence that the day will surely grow longer until the thrushes come back to their summer homes; gather all our hopes that come with the birth of a new year, into the great crackling yule-log which most heartily cheers us through the long, black winter night. And, because the holly was unafraid of the snow, and the mistletoe did not fear the ice, and the evergreen cedar withstood boldly the boasting of the frost, we take them into our homes to learn from them their lessons of faith in God, at whose word each baby year is born.



XX.

So, it is Christmas with its solstice and Saviour and Santa Claus that offers to us the most cogent and comforting arguments for our assurance of immortality, reminding us that from the beginning of life on earth all things have risen from the dead. Each spring, for millions of years the boughs of billions of trees and the limbs of trillions of shrubs burgeon with vernal life, emerging from wintry death. On not one easter, in all earth's hundreds of millions of years, has the Day-Star summoned them in vain. Always they have broken their tombs and risen triumphantly to meet their Lord in the air—bluet and daffodil, violet and crocus, tulip and anemone. It is the Great Analogy. Even Neanderthal man trusted it and turned the pallid faces of his dead toward the east. Daily the God-Sun died and rose again from the dead. Annually the Earth died and rose again from the dead. There never had been, there was not and there never would be any marvel that remotely approached the myriads upon myriads of miracles which were performed by the Sun who, at his own good pleasure, from the poverty of winter created the paradise of spring. Each easter, dead grass, dead shrubs, dead trees, dead mountains, dead valleys, dead lakes, dead rivers, dead forests, dead deserts awakened to joyous life. Should only man die, never to live again? The perfect answer was given more than a millenium before the birth of Jesus by the prophet-king of Egypt:

*"And lo, I find Thee, also, in my heart.
I, Khu-en-Aten, find Thee and adore.
O Thou, whose dawn is life, whose setting death,
In the Great Dawn life thou up me, thy son!"*



XXI.

There is the sound of sleighbells on the lawn and the faint tapping of little hooves on the roof. There is the patter of tiny feet on the floor above, where expectant eyes peep eagerly toward the stockings on the mantel. The Yule-log crackles merrily. Come memories of shepherds feeding their flocks by night and the sound of angel choirs and of camels with muffled feet and tinkling bells hurrying Magi, star-led, toward Bethlehem. With a soft, muted crash a snow-laden limb falls on the porch. In a distant tower, bells are chiming. Joyous carollers are singing, without. Welcoming candles glow, within. Christmas has come, bringing its blessed benisons, always, everywhere, to all.

THE END

Oglethorpe University,
Christmas Eve, 1940